

Commonly asked HR Questions

Do you feel nervous before an HR interview and are clueless about the kind of questions that can be asked during the HR round?

Well, don't worry. We will help you prepare for the HR round and also with the commonly asked questions during that round.

But, before that, let us begin by understanding what is an HR round?

Behavioral Questions, often also referred to as 'HR Round', are used to test a candidate's attitude and soft skills (communication, team work, leadership, etc.). It is a vast area because depending on the type of job/internship you are applying to, there may be a particular aspect of your behavior or personality that a recruiter may want to assess.

For example, a particular profile may require you to work in large teams (say a large scale IT project) in which case they would want to assess whether you are a teamplayer or an individual contributor. Another profile may require you to do ground level hard work (say Rural Area Sales Manager) and the company may want to know whether you believe in the dignity of work (however small) or not, etc. So, let us understand some key points about the HR Questions.

First is that most of these questions are open-ended questions with no one right answer and secondly, what matters is whether you have understood what the employer really wants to assess from that question and whether your answer addresses that.

Now that we have understood what an HR round is all about, we will now look at some of the most common questions that you may face in an HR round, why those questions are asked, how to answer, how not to answer them, and a sample answer for them.

So, let us start with the first most common question that is asked during the interviews and that is -

1. Tell me about yourself.

Why this question is asked- Well, this question is meant to be an ice-breaker for you and the interviewer to settle in and get comfortable with each other. It also allows the interviewer to judge how nervous you are and a confident answer can be a great start and half the battle would be won.

How to answer- Start off with a brief intro, quickly move over to your career interests (and why), and a bit of information on your hobbies and interests.

How NOT to answer- When answering this question, do not start narrating your life history from childhood onwards, or spend too much time on family details, or what you did in school, etc.

Sample answer- Hi, my name is Rahul. I am a 4th year B.Tech Computer Science student at IIT Madras. My primary interest lies in the field of Information Security. I started programming in C language when I was in 10th standard and developed an interest in finding loopholes in IT systems, web applications and networks in particular, when I first read about the Anonymous group of hackers 3 years ago. What started as a hobby to break into the college website has grown into a full fledged passion over time. Other than reading extensively on the subject and tinkering with websites of various sizes, I have also completed CEH (Certified Ethical Hacker) training from EC Council. In my spare time, I love to read science fiction and go trekking. Michael Crichton is my favorite author, and trekking has been a hobby- thanks largely to my upbringing in the hilly terrains of Dehradun.

The next most commonly asked question is -

2. Why do you want to join our organisation and not this other company (say X)?

Why this question is asked- This question is asked to understand how much research about the company you have done before the interview and if there is a genuine fit between what the organisation does and offers to its employees and what you want.

How to answer- You should be specific. Mention things that you know about the organisation which you find exciting. There could be different things about an organisation (size, customer loyalty, it being innovation friendly, work culture, team, maybe it offers support for higher studies etc.) that one may find interesting and offer that as a reason. 'It pays well' can also be an answer but only a part of the answer and not the entire answer because else it would naturally lead to another difficult question, 'If tomorrow, some other organisation were to offer you a higher salary, would you leave us?'

How NOT to answer- Do not offer platitudes (similar to 'Objective' section in resume) such as 'It is the best company that provides a challenging environment for professional growth'. Do not start criticising this other company (X) either.

Sample answer- I want to join (say Internshala) because it is a start up with a young team and it is solving a problem that I can personally identify with and when solved would have a huge impact on our college education system. I myself want to have my own startup a few years down the line and being part of Internshala would help me learn the ropes of entrepreneurship while allowing me to contribute to making the lives of millions of college students better.

Another important question that is asked during interviews is-

3. What are your strengths?

Why this question is asked- To know you better, to understand if you are self aware of what you are good at. Also, it helps to assess if you are a right fit for the role.

How to answer- During your introspection before the interview, you may have identified a few things that you are good at (say programming, or leading teams) or a few positive behavior traits (good attention to details) etc. You can mention all of them or pick 2-3 that are most relevant to the organisation and the job role you have applied for. Always support your claims with real examples from your life.

How NOT to answer- You should never speak a parroted list of qualities and strengths such as 'I am hardworking, sincere, punctual, law abiding, full of zeal, innovative...' without offering examples or evidence from your life to support your claims. It is very easy to spot such answers and they leave a poor impression about you on the employer.

Sample answer- My biggest strength is my writing skills. I am both versatile and creative. I maintain a blog which is followed by 100+ friends and have written on subjects as diverse as India's freedom struggle to Bollywood blockbusters. Since I can communicate effectively through my writing, I often get to be part of the marketing team of various college festivals. I also have good coordination skills which allowed me to effectively lead a team of 10 junior writers to bring out our annual campus magazine.

Next commonly asked question is the exact opposite of the previous question, that is-

4. What are your weaknesses?

Why this question is asked- We don't think this question can/should ever be asked to assess whether you are a good fit for the role because no candidate in his/her right mind would tell an interviewer about a weakness that will jeopardise his/her chances of getting the job/internship (such as 'I often beat people up in my fit of rage'). However, this question can be used to assess how self aware and how honest (in part) you are about yourself.

How to answer- You can answer this question by picking a relatively safe weakness that would not hamper your chances of getting the job/internship. You can also offer what you are doing to correct that weakness now that you have realised that you have a weakness.

How NOT to answer- Something that you should definitely not do while answering this question is to not 'invent' a weakness that you do not have that you can present to make it sound like a strength. For example - 'I am a perfectionist'. This is because next they would ask you examples from your life when you were perfectionist and it led to problems and then you would have to invent more lies.

Sample answer- I often tend to get lost in details which hampers the progress of my work. I faced this problem during my final project where I was stuck at one place for long because I wanted every small detail to be right. My professor advised me to follow the 80:20 principle where I learned that there are some things which are absolutely critical for the success of the job and there are a few which can be fixed in the next iteration. What is more important is that work moves forward. I think it is a great advice I had received and I make a conscious effort to apply it to my work now.

The next commonly asked question during interviews is about your career goal, that is-

5. What is your career goal?

Why this question is asked- To see how this job/internship fits into your career goal.

How to answer- You should be honest while answering this question. If you have some specific thoughts such as 'I want to be a great programmer' or 'I want to work for women's rights' - mention that. If your stated career goal is vastly different from the position you have applied for, you should be ready with thoughts on how this role fits with that career goal. If you do not have a specific career interest at this point, that is fine too.

How NOT to answer- Take care that you do not offer too grandiose a career goal ('I want to bring world peace') without any supporting evidence or activity on your part so far. Similarly, do not mention a career goal that is too contrasting with the current profile that you have applied for without being clear on how this profile fits with that goal.

Sample answer- There are a few areas that interest me and I am still in the exploration phase before I decide which one I would like to turn into a career goal. I like programming as much as managing/leading teams and I also have an active interest in social issues. I am hoping as I mature and have more work experience, what I want to do eventually will become clearer to me.

Another important and commonly asked question during interviews is -

6. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Why this question is asked- This question is another variant of the previous question. The interviewer just wants to know if you have a clear line of thought (it is OK if you

don't) on what you want from your career and how this opportunity could lead you there.

How to answer- About answering this question in the correct manner, well, honestly no one (including the interviewer) really knows where he/she would be in 5 years. Best you can do is to outline your current interests and express desire to explore them further as a career option and grow in them with time.

How NOT to answer- Something you should ensure is to not give too tongue-in-cheek answers such as - ('I see myself in your position in 5 years') or an answer which shows you have no idea of career progression in the organisation ('I want to reach upto CEO level of this company'). These answers will not leave a good impression about you on the interviewer.

Sample answer- At this point, since I am more interested in programming, I want to start a career in the same field. At the end of 5 years I hope to either have decided to pursue a specialisation in this or change tracks to move towards the business side of things because as I mentioned- coordinating and leading teams also excite me a lot.

The next most commonly asked question is -

7. What are your expectations from this job/internship?

Why this question is asked- The purpose of this question is to assess whether there is a good match between the role and your expectations. It also helps to assess whether you have understood the role in detail or not because if there is a gap between the profile and your expectations, it is unlikely that you would stay for long.

How to answer- While answering this question, you just need to remember that there must be some reason why you have applied for that particular role and you must have some expectations in return - state those. Ask yourself, what do you hope to learn or get out of that role? Usually what you expect from a role should prepare you for your ultimate career interest and it helps if you can show that direct connection.

How NOT to answer- You should not mention anything which is completely out of scope of the role. For example, don't say 'I want to learn marketing' when the role is clearly technical. Also many times, you may be applying to a role just because there are no other opportunities or because money is good; however, it is safe not to mention those as the sole reasons. In every role, there is something else that you may find worth your interest that you can mention as well. For example, every role comes with a corporate exposure and networking opportunities, which are legitimate expectations to have.

Sample answer- My primary expectation is that I would get to learn how things work in a start up because eventually I want to start on my own. Since I will be working in a technical profile, I hope to learn about the entire product development cycle from

ideation to launch. Sense of ownership is important to me and hence I hope to get the creative freedom to propose and implement new ideas. The next question is something you should answer very carefully and that is-

8. What are your expectations on salary?

Why this question is asked- The purpose of this question is to again assess if there is a good match between what the role offers and what you expect and also to get a sense of how important money is for you.

How to answer- You should be honest and realistic while answering this question. You can mention if there is a particular ambition such as 'I want to save for my higher studies 2 years down the line' or financial commitment like I need to repay my educational loan in the next 2 years for which money is important.

How NOT to answer- You do not have to lie that money is not important for you if it is. Usually, it is not a good idea to quote a number either because, in the first job, you usually have a very limited scope for negotiation.

Sample answer- My primary objective is to learn the latest technologies and as long as I am being paid as per market standard, I am comfortable with that. I do have an education loan of Rs. 5 lac that I need to pay back in the next 2 years and I am hoping my salary would take care of that.

Now, there are chances that you have applied to other internships and jobs as well along with the one you are attending the interview for. So, another important question that can be asked to you during the interview can be -

9. What are the other jobs/internships you have applied to and if you were selected for all, which one would you join?

Why this question is asked- Well, the purpose of this question is to assess how likely you are to join if you were offered this role. Don't think that someone would not hire you just because you have applied to other (possibly better) opportunities, but it would help them be mentally prepared and possibly keep a few candidates in the wait list in case you are not able to join later on.

How to answer- You can be honest and tell them about the different kinds of opportunities you have applied for (you don't have to give the exact details) but at the same time emphasize on what is it that excites you about this opportunity the most. If there are too many options you have open in front of you, play that down a bit as it may create a negative impression of you as a 'window shopper' or someone who is too undecided.

How NOT to answer- What you should definitely not do is lie that this is the only role you have applied to if that is not true. It is easy to spot plus would leave a bad taste if later on, you were offered this role and you did not join.

Sample answer- Since my primary interest is in marketing, there are a couple of other marketing profiles that I have applied to and am waiting for the results. I am particularly interested in this role because it is in the FMCG sector that I prefer plus it is Mumbai based, my hometown, which is an added advantage.

Another important question that you can expect during the interview is -

10. If you were offered a similar job/internship with another organisation with higher pay, wouldn't you leave us?

Why this question is asked- The question may seem tricky to you but the purpose of asking this question is to understand your true motivation behind joining this job/internship and to assess how important money really is for you.

How to answer- You can answer this question the same as the question about your expectations on the salary. Highlight what other aspects of the role (other than money) are important for you and how money is not the sole criteria for you.

How NOT to answer- What you should be careful about and not do while answering this question is to not say a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. You should elaborate that with what your thought process is behind that answer.

Sample answer- As I mentioned, other than the fact that I need to save money to pursue higher education, my primary objective is to learn the absolute latest in the field of technology which I hope I will be able to learn better here than anywhere else. So unless there is a huge gap between salaries offered in this company vs. another, I don't see a reason why I would want to switch. Also I am aware that changing too many companies too soon may not look good on my resume for my future career.

Another question that can be asked during the interview could be-

11. If you were to join us, what is one thing you would like to change about the company?

Why this question is asked- The idea of the interviewer behind asking this question is to understand how much you know about the company and how deeply you have thought and researched about it.

How to answer- Based on your research (company website, talking to seniors, internet, etc.), see if there are any obvious improvement opportunities that you can suggest.

Also, you can always suggest an improvement as a question and not as a suggestion in case you are not sure of the feasibility of the idea.

You will understand this better when we share a sample answer with you.

How NOT to answer- You should never start with negative or trivial criticism. Remember, there is always a positive way to say things. Do not come across as a too strongly opinionated person as there may be genuine reasons which you would not know of for why things are the way they are.

Sample answer- While browsing through the Internshala website, I saw there was no advanced search option where a user can specify the stream or the location by which he/she wants to filter internships listed. I feel that may be one improvement opportunity. Also, I notice that Internshala is not very active on Twitter and I wonder if there is an opportunity we may be missing there which I would want to fix.

To assess your skills and your fitness for the role, another question that you can also expect from the interviewer is-

12. Share an example of an incident when you had to work really hard to achieve something.

Why this question is asked- Apart from assessing your skills, the purpose behind asking this question is that every company likes candidates who can work hard and appreciate the dignity of labour. They want to assess if you are ready to put the required efforts that the job may require.

How to answer- You can give an example from your life (as recent as possible), give context (what was the situation and what was needed from you), what you did, and what was the outcome.

How NOT to answer- Something that you should not do while answering this question is give examples of situations which were results of your own carelessness to begin with and you had to put in efforts at the last minute. For example, don't say that 'I did not study the entire semester and put six night outs in a row to clear the final exams'.

Sample answer- I was a race marshal at Indian Grand Prix 2019, working in a team that handled logistics, race course communication and back store management. The work ranged from assembling washrooms, filling POP bags, communication with race track posts to delivering material to these posts on race day. The team had a mix of people from varied financial backgrounds, thus there was friction regarding the kind of work one had to perform. One day before the Grand Prix, three out of five of my teammates backed out, as dustbins had to be unloaded, unpacked, assembled, loaded again and distributed to various posts. The two of us made it fun, playing with a knife, chirping. We completed the work and reached the accommodation venue at three in the night, even though we had to return to work at seven in the morning. The next day the

whole team of marshals applauded us and we walked like kings.

Some more example based questions could also be asked during the interview such as the interviewer may ask you-

13. Give an example from your life when you took an initiative.

Why this question is asked- So, no one wants an employee or an intern who needs to be spoon-fed and told everything. The interviewer wants to test if you have an inherent nature to make things better and if you are a self-starter.

How to answer- Well, you can answer this question the same way as the previous question. You can give an example from your real-life; describe the situation before you took the initiative, what did you do, what was your motivation, and what was the outcome.

How NOT to answer- Do not try to pass off your regular responsibilities as an example of initiative. Initiative always should be to change the status quo. For example if you were a branch representative responsible for placement of the batch, you can not say 'I contacted 60 companies to invite them to visit the campus' because that is part of your job and anyone else would have done the same.

Sample answer- As the branch representative, I realised that we were not using our alumni network effectively to increase the number of companies that visit the campus. I, along with 2 other team members, prepared a database of last 5 years' alumni and contacted them to get 100 new companies to the campus this year.

Another example based question you can expect could be-

14. Give me an example when you had a conflict of opinions with your team member or friend and how did you resolve it?

Why this question is asked- This question is asked to understand your people skills and how well you can work in a team.

How to answer- You should take the same approach as the previous question to answer this question. Describe the situation, your understanding of why the conflict arose, various options you considered or tried to resolve the conflict, final outcome and what you learned from the whole experience.

How NOT to answer- Do not start off with 'It was his fault' approach. Even if it was, give sufficient background for the interviewer to understand the situation fully.

Sample answer- During a class market research project, my team member wanted to send out an online survey to people because it would be quicker, cheaper, get us a larger sample size, and allow us to save data in electronic format which would be easier to analyse. But I was keen to conduct an on-ground survey because I felt that the required target group for this survey was not that internet savvy plus I also wanted to capture their facial expressions/tones of their voice, etc. which are not possible in an online survey. We did try to find out if there was a subset of people among our target group to whom we could send out the online survey but we could not. Finally I was able to explain to my team member the criticality of getting a right sample more than a large sample and he agreed. The data size was extremely limited and we called that out in our presentation as a limitation of our research.

Another question that can be asked is-

15. Give us an example of when you think you demonstrated leadership.

Why this question is asked- The purpose of asking this question is to understand your leadership skills and to evaluate what kind of a leader you may be.

How to answer- You can describe the situation/responsibility, give a sense on the scale of the challenge or task, how did you lead, and what was the impact/outcome.

How NOT to answer- You should not exaggerate unnecessarily lest you get caught in follow up questions.

Sample answer- In my 2nd year, I wanted to start English classes for freshers who came from Hindi medium schools as most of them struggled adapting to English as an instruction language inside the classroom. I formed a help group and recruited 10 of my friends and batchmates to join and devote 2 hours every week taking English classes for our juniors. I also had to convince college administration to let us use the department classrooms on the weekends for this purpose. The whole experience, at times very stressful, taught me a lot about building and leading a team and taking an idea from concept stage to execution with help of the team.

And lastly, you can be asked-

16. Give an example from your life when you failed.

Why this question is asked- The idea behind asking this question is to understand how you perform and behave in situations that are not favourable, whether you are graceful in the defeat, and how you learn from your mistakes.

How to answer- In the answer to this question, more than failure itself, how you reacted to it is of greater importance. You should emphasize on what you learned from it and how you are applying those lessons in your life now.

How NOT to answer- You should not blame someone else (atleast not entirely) for the failure. You can choose an example that allowed you to reflect on your own behavior and actions and let you learn from it.

Sample answer- I had a reputation for being a sincere and hardworking student in school but in my 12th, I got distracted and did not study the entire year and resorted to cheating in exams. My teacher saw me cheating but instead of throwing me out of the examination hall he just came up to me and said - 'I don't think you were cheating. You are such a sincere and hardworking student, you can never cheat.' I was ashamed of myself for letting him and his faith in me down. I learned that there is no substitute for hardwork and I also learned that 'means' are far more important than the 'end' - a principle that I hold very close to my heart even today!

So, with this, we have seen some important questions that can be asked during the HR interview. But, please know that it is not necessary that these questions will only be asked during the HR round. They can be asked to you even during other interview rounds.